



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

SOME RECENT ETYMOLOGICAL BLUNDERS

BY JAMES C. NELSON
High School, Salem, Oregon

Voltaire's famous remark to the effect that etymology is a science where the vowels do not count at all and the consonants very little seems to have been taken by some contemporary botanists more seriously than the great satirist ever intended. There is an apparent disposition in the botanical world to regard the etymology of scientific names as a necessary evil, somewhat like taxation, and to consider the whole subject as lying outside of the field in which scientific method is supposed to prevail. Not only is there a deplorable lack of accuracy in the spelling and pronunciation of such names—more than one botanist of my acquaintance seeming to make it a special point of honor to pronounce all such names incorrectly—but there is a dearth of exact knowledge regarding the formation and significance of these terms that is well-nigh appalling. Since the readers of this journal perhaps do not keep a vigilant eye on what is going on in adjacent fields, it might interest them to see in what a cavalier manner the accepted rules of etymology are sometimes treated when they get away from home.

I have been amusing myself during odd moments this summer by looking over the explanations of generic names set forth in a botanical manual that recently emanated from one of our Far Western universities. To give a complete list of all the errors, wild guesses, and derivations apparently based on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle contained in its 450 pages would absorb the greater part of the space in this number of the *Journal*. Perhaps a single specimen will serve to show what liberties have been taken with the time-honored rules that are supposed to govern the formation of derivatives.

Under the word *portulaca*, the name given by Tournefort to the genus whose best-known representative in North America is the

common purslane or "pusley," we read as follows: "Said to be from Latin *porto*, 'I carry,' *lacca*, 'juice'; the plants are fleshy." "Said to be" is a phrase that covers a multitude of sins and relieves the authors of the full responsibility for this wondrous deliverance; but the fact that they have recorded the conjecture without adverse criticism evidently means that they saw in it no inherent impossibility. To the trained Latinist I of course owe an apology for entering into any discussion of the foregoing etymological horror, inasmuch as the utter absurdity of it stands out at the first glance; but since all botanists are not classicists, I trust I may be allowed to present the matter for the consideration of the former.

In the first place, there is no evidence at all that Tournefort constructed the word himself. While his own Latin was not always impeccable, he was sufficiently familiar with the classics to know that the word *portulaca* occurs both in Columella and Celsus, evidently applied to what we know as purslane: and he doubtless borrowed it, just as he did many other plant names, as a convenient and appropriate designation for the new genus. To regard it as his own creation seems therefore wholly untenable; and when a word was simply taken in its exact form from the Latin authors the best manuals usually consider it sufficient to state the fact of its classical origin.

Since this word does not appear to be unrelated to other Latin words and has none of the marks of a radical, it is perfectly legitimate to inquire into its possible etymology. This our authors have evidently undertaken to do; and in the process they have succeeded in breaking some of the most fundamental laws of word formation. These may be summarized as follows:

1. In a compound made up of a substantive and a verbal element the former almost invariably stands *first*.
2. The regular connecting vowel in such cases is *i*. *U* in such a capacity would be an anomaly not justified in anything but the most grotesque *sermo plebeius*.
3. The word *lacca* could not lose one of its root consonants; both *c*'s would have to appear in the compound.

Furthermore, the meaning of both components has been grossly misunderstood.

1. The word for "carry" in the sense intended here is not *porto* but *fero*.

2. The word *lacca*, while not unknown, cannot be shown to have any such meaning as "juice." It is used in Vegetius of a swelling on the legs of cattle, and in Apuleius as the name of a plant otherwise unknown; but perhaps our authors suffered a *lapsus calami* and wrote *lacca* for *lac*, which is used for the milky juice of plants: for example, *lac ficulneum*, Columella; *lac caprifici*, Celsus. In that case we stumble against an error of fact rather than of words, for the plants of this genus, while abounding in watery juice, are never milky. If they were so, Tournefort was enough of a Latinist to have coined the word *Lactifera* to indicate the fact; but, as was observed above, he did *not* coin his name, but simply borrowed it from the Latin authors with whose works he was most familiar. What it really means perhaps can never be known with certainty, but there is at least nothing essentially improbable in Walde's conjecture¹ that it is from *portula*, diminutive of *porta* (used by Livy), referring to the transversely opening pod, the upper part lifting as a lid, and the suffix *-aca*, found also in *Pastinaca*, the name of the parsnip. Yet many a beginning student in botany, happily released in these days of "optional" courses from the tyranny of Latin, will believe to the end of his days that the above-mentioned fantastic and puerile etymology is accepted by the scientific world as final.

This word *lacca* seems in some way to have got on the nerves of our authors. When they come to the genus *Phytolacca* (containing the pokeweed), which at the best is no very high tribute to Tournefort's skill in word-formation, we find the following: "Greek *φυτόν*, 'plant,' Latin *lacca*, 'lacquer'; referring to the red juice in the berries."² Here the first member at least is correctly stated; but in the case of the second, Tournefort himself seems to have violated the fundamental rule that forbids the making of hybrids, and borrowed a word from the vernacular, the French *laque*,³ in

¹ *Lat. etym. Wörterbuch*, s.v. *portulaca*.

² The author's transliteration into Roman letters—a clumsy and inaccurate practice that I shall not attempt to imitate.

³ Gray's *Manual* incorrectly spells it *lac*.

the sense of our "lake," signifying pigment or paint (a root apparently of Persian origin), and Latinized it just enough to get it into combination.

That I have not taken advantage of a single slip, such as may befall the most careful writer, ought to be evident from the following selections, taken almost at random from other parts of the book referred to:

"*Philotria*. Greek φύλλον, 'leaf,' τρεῖς, 'three.'" (Totally impossible.)

"*Peramium*. Latin *per*, 'through,' *amium*, 'love'; on account of reputed medicinal qualities." (Our authors have here unearthed a word whose acquaintance the rest of us have yet to make!)

"*Populus*. Latin *populus*, 'the common people'; these were planted in public places by the Romans." (Every schoolboy *once* knew that *populus*, "poplar," has the *o* long.)

"*Humulus*. Diminutive of Latin *humus*, 'the ground'; because prostrate in the absence of support." (The root here is not Latin at all!)

"*Roripa*. Said to be from Celtic *ros*, 'dew,' *ripa*, 'a bank'; referring to the habitat of some species." (Odd that the two Latin words of the same form and meaning should be repeated *literatim* in Celtic!)

"*Cytisus*. From Cythrus, one of the Cyclades, where this or a related plant was first found." (I can find no such island—possibly Cythera is meant.)

"*Opuntia*. Grew in Greece near the town Opuntia." (*Opus* is the nominative form.)

"*Gayophytum*. Probably Greek γάϊος, 'on land,' φυτόν, 'plant.'" (The first member here is clearly personal, in honor of Claude Gay, the botanist of Chile.)

"*Glehnia*. Probably Greek γλῆνος, a thing to stare at because it is so woolly." (Imagine a rough breathing in the *middle* of a Greek word! This too is clearly personal, and there is nothing specially amazing about the wooliness of this maritime genus.)

"*Malvastrum*. Malva+Greek ἄστρον, 'a star.' Why?" (This "Why?" seems quite in order. It is simply the contemptuous diminutive.)

"*Nephrophyllidium*. Greek νεφρός, 'the kidneys' [*sic*], φύλλον, 'a leaf,' ἴδιος, 'peculiar'; hence peculiar kidney-shaped leaf." (The last part strikes one as a bit idiotic! It is simply a diminutive ending.)

Occasionally no effort is made to indicate the derivation, when it could have been very easily conjectured, for example:

Lilaea, in honor of A. R. Delile.

Piperia, in honor of C. V. Piper.

Castanopsis, resembling *Castanea*, the chestnut.

Utricularia, from *utriculus*, a small bladder.

Pinguicula, diminutive of *pinguis*, "fat or greasy."

Sometimes our authors append the word "Origin?" indicating that the stream of imagination began to run low. In nearly every case they could have obtained the necessary data by consulting the original publication of the genus. After the bold flights quoted above, we find after the word *Sieversia* the timid note, "Probably in honor of someone," when the fact is perfectly evident and could have been easily confirmed.

Occasionally they launch out into Celtic, where I am wholly unable to follow them, for example:

"*Alisma*. Celtic *alis*, 'water.'" (But ἄλισμα is good Greek.)

"*Salix*. Celtic *sal*, 'near,' *lis*, 'water.'" (A good Latin word.)

"*Quercus*. Celtic *quer*, 'fine,' *cuez*, 'a tree,' because the sacred mistletoe grew upon it." (It is the classical Latin word.)

Once in a while there is a dazzling burst of genius like the following:

"*Smelowskia*. Evidently named for some Russian."

"*Naumburgia*. Probably in honor of a Mr. Naumburg."

"*Boschniakia*. Honor of some Russian, a Mr. Boschniak."

As long as the generic names were among those explained in Gray's *Manual* they seem to have had no trouble. Where the *Manual* was modest enough to admit its inability to explain the word, our authors seem to have rushed into the breach with some wild conjecture based on superficial resemblances, after the manner of the etymologies in Gellius, and offered them as fact. In the case of other genera, where the meaning could have been easily ascertained by consulting the original publication, they have owned

to a lack of thoroughness by the use of "Why?" Yet this purports to be a scientific work! It is a strange view of scientific method that admits its validity in one branch of knowledge and denies it in another. The classical languages rest on an absolutely scientific body of knowledge, and their phenomena are subject to laws as definite and well established as those of biology. Latin was for hundreds of years the language of botany as of every other science. The Latin names of plants, arbitrary as they may seem, are an absolute necessity if we are ever to attain a precise understanding of what plant is referred to in any discussion. Yet because some of our scientists have been brought up to believe that Latin is somehow associated with mediaeval scholasticism, they affect to disregard it, go so far as to sneer at it in conversation, and treat us to exhibitions such as I have tried to reproduce! It is as if the surgeon should declare that there was one of his tools that he did not care for; he would not learn how to use it and would permit it to become dull and rusty; and then some day he might be called on to use that very tool in a critical operation!

To display ignorance of scientific method in nomenclature is simply to display ignorance of scientific method in general. Every systematist in the course of his training could be brought to realize this, with very slight expenditure of time or effort. As a humble emissary from the botanical camp, might I suggest to our brothers in the classical field that if one among them would undertake the preparation of a brief and simple handbook of etymology, setting forth the rules that govern the formation of Greek and Latin derivatives, it would come very near meeting what our advertising experts are fond of calling a "long-felt want," and some botanical authors might as a result be spared life-long mortification?